

19th-Century American Painting

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Albert Boime. *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting c. 1830–1865.* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991. 199 pp.; 8 color ills., 47 black-and-white. \$24.95

Elizabeth Johns. *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. 266 pp.; 25 color ills., 55 black-and-white. \$50.00

John Wilmerding. *American Views: Essays on American Art.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. 377 pp.; 29 color ills., 224 black-and-white. \$45.00

The rising interest in the history of nineteenth-century American painting that was already apparent throughout the United States in the 1950s intensified dramatically in the 1960s as a result of a unique conjunction of circumstances. In that decade graduate programs in the history of art, many of them newly minted, began to send into this then thinly populated (and not highly regarded) subfield of the discipline a steady stream of young scholars specialized in pre-twentieth-century American art. This first sizable generation of professionally trained Americanists took as its aim nothing less than the development of a comprehensive body of research literature relating to nineteenth-century American painting and, to a lesser extent, sculpture. The birth in the same decade of federal and state programs of support for museum exhibitions encouraged this research and enhanced the prospects that it would reach print by greatly enlarging the role of museums as publishers of scholarly literature. The new programs enabled, and often required, a museum to augment a publicly funded display of objects with one or more new interpretive components of "lasting value," something that would outlive the show itself and preserve not only its conceptual and documentary structure but also the research that undergirded it.

This component frequently took the form of an exhibition catalogue containing one or more historical or interpretive essays. Such catalogues

were hardly a novel kind of publication, but as they proliferated, beginning in the 1960s, they became larger, more ambitious in their aims, and more prestigious as the exhibitions themselves became events of increased cultural significance. The writing of interpretive catalogue essays had previously been the task of museum staff members, many of whom lacked academic credentials, though they often possessed authoritative knowledge in their fields. Now the catalogue became a major outlet for the scholarly work of the new generation of university-trained art historians, many of whom were situated in academe rather than in museums. Meanwhile, the art market instituted its own programs of support for research and publication, with dealers' exhibition catalogues following the model of those published by museums.

As an outlet for scholarly writing about the history of nineteenth-century American painting, exhibition catalogues from museums and galleries have since the 1960s outpaced academic journals in the sheer volume of words put into print. They also have found a larger and far more varied audience. Though monographs unrelated to exhibitions have assumed an ever-greater presence in the field since the 1960s, as have scholarly journals, researchers long ago learned that a large and indispensable part of the literature of nineteenth-century American painting exists only in the form of exhibition catalogue essays. They have learned as well that the genre possesses a distinctive combination of strengths and weaknesses.

Most catalogue essays are concise, reflecting a pre-set word limit. Most address a general readership rather than colleague specialists (and in seeking to be broadly accessible they have run counter to the customary practice of recent years in other disciplines of the humanities). Many sustain a sharp, sometimes exclusive, focus on objects and their makers. Few engage considerations beyond those determined by the scope of the exhibition. The reader often senses that the typical exhibition catalogue essay offers a fragment, and perhaps only a small one, of what the author would have said given more space, choice, and time.

Twelve exhibition catalogue essays by John Wilmerding are among the nineteen pieces reprinted in his *American Views*. They examine the work of William Bradford, Fitz Hugh Lane, George Caleb Bingham, Thomas Eakins, and Winslow Homer, among others, and consider such broad topics as the place of the Maine coast and Rhode Island terrain as formative elements in the development of American painting. The original dates of publication range from 1968 to 1990. All seem to have been returned to print without significant revision, and this is regrettable. One wishes that the author had offered in a prefatory note or an afterword to each piece his second thoughts on the subject (for he must have had some) or had otherwise brought the reader up to date. His musings on Thomas Eakins's late portraits, first published in 1978, include some interesting insights, but the reader is left in the dark about more recent Eakins studies of momentous importance, including major monographs by Lloyd Goodrich and Elizabeth Johns.¹ A few of the essays in this collection, notably those on Luminism, seem marooned in time, unaware of the attention paid to their subjects in recent years. This leaves the reader regretting that neither the author nor his publisher found a way to bring the text of this handsome volume up to the present, where scholars expect it to be and the general reader deserves to find it.

Certain qualities in these essays survive nicely, however, especially Wilmerding's open affection for American art, his good-natured interpretations, and his propensity to weave together snippets (and often more) of literature, history, and criticism to enrich his subjects. He is most successful at this in his essays on topics relating to marine painting, less so in his attempts to establish parallels between nineteenth-century American painting and modernism, as in his argument that the perceived analogies between Luminism and twentieth-century Abstract Expressionism hold significant meaning. A festschrift contribution on Winslow Homer, several other scholarly articles, and two chapters from his monograph on John Peto make up the remainder of the volume.²

Albert Boime's *Magisterial Gaze* is a very different kind of book. It consists of a single long

essay (divided into five chapters) that in effect serves as an interpretive text for a nonexistent exhibition. Boime has brought together reproductions of a number of paintings and prints to illustrate his thesis that the elevated viewpoint commonly found in American landscape art of the middle decades of the nineteenth century pictorially expresses a nationalist ideology—that of Manifest Destiny—and that it does so more overtly than previous writers about these works have understood or allowed. He makes it clear at the outset that he intends to examine the political thought inherent in these works to the virtual exclusion of other considerations, and the result is an essay of notable originality whose sharp focus, sustained throughout, is in the tradition of catalogue essays. That its concerns are not with art as art, but rather with art as a source for ideological explication, becomes clear on the first page of the essay. There, a detail of Frederic Edwin Church's *Mount Ktaadn* (1853; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven) surrenders its center to a "window" of text and allows the first sentences of the author's argument to mask most of the view from above.

The argument opens itself to challenge repeatedly. With what confidence can we accept that the elevated viewpoint was markedly more distinctive to the work of artists in the United States than to those in Europe? To what extent did earlier traditions of military and civilian topographical drawing in America, and their use to describe previously unknown terrain, contribute to this mode of depicting the land from on high? Was not ascent to heights, both material and spiritual, a staple of Romantic imagery throughout the Western world during the first half of the nineteenth century? Keats can scarcely have had Manifest Destiny in mind when he wrote in his sonnet "O Solitude!": "Climb with me the steep, / nature's observatory," there to discover "the highest bliss of human kind." The reader soon wonders whether Boime means to indict a generation of American landscape artists as knowing accessories in the rape of the North American continent. Indeed, he uses that favorite trope of the 1980s, the gaze as implicit male aggression, to nudge aside transcendentalism's transparent eyeball. But despite the reservations that many readers will harbor about this and other assumptions that inform the book, Boime's ever-interesting study is likely to leave a lasting impression on the present generation's reading of nineteenth-century portrayals of the North American land. We have inherited and fostered overly bland readings of much American landscape

painting; the *Magisterial Gaze* encourages us to comprehend a darker underside.

The sense of occasion—of special event—that informs and limits many catalogue essays is nowhere evident in Elizabeth Johns's *American Genre Painting*, but her concision is in the spirit of their best style. Without wasting words, her book builds steadily through two hundred pages to present a highly original and persuasive history of antebellum genre painting in the United States. It is a revelatory history in which the examination of pictorial detail; variant images; revised titles; social, political, and economic history; and contemporary criticism brings forth fresh insights page after page. The cumulative effect is impressive. Rarely has a study of American art of the era sustained a line of argument so vitally over so many pages. The argument itself arises from Johns's questions: Whose everyday "life" is depicted in American genre subjects? What relationship existed between the players in this "life" and contemporary viewers? A logical consistency of thought shines forth from her synthesis of much new documentation.

Attempts to explain works of art through their contexts have often enough resulted in patchworks of fact and conjecture possessing little persuasive power as history. Johns has managed to bond the works she discusses to events and ideas of their eras with such solid evidence and systematic argument that more than one reader will feel that many of these works have never before been adequately understood, at least not since their own time. Her discussion of even so well-studied an artist as William Sidney Mount enlarges our comprehension of him to the point where he and his work seem new. Richard Caton Woodville, George Caleb Bingham, William Ranney, James Clonney, Eastman Johnson, Lily Martin Spencer, and David Gilmore Blythe are among the key figures in this history. Numerous lesser-known, but not necessarily less interesting, artists enrich the discussion.

Johns's attention to "the politics of everyday life" incorporates questions of race, gender, economics, geography, and power that, if they are not always wholly new in the study of American genre painting, have never before been treated so effectively as an interlocking complex. From time to time the reader may wonder whether in all of this the paintings themselves will remain the central interest or will instead serve only as illustrations of life in America or as exemplifications of theory, but the discussion, supported by good reproductions, keeps the objects at or near the forefront.

Neither Johns nor Boime devotes much at-

tention in these studies to one quality that counted for much in both the production and contemporary reception of the works they discuss, a quality that still carries force when many of the paintings are exhibited. This is the poetic quality. Visual poetry is ineffable, of course, but it is also real, and when its presence seems to go unrecognized, other considerations begin to assume disproportionate significance. It is one of the strengths of Wilmerding's best essays that he acknowledges the poetic feeling in the works he discusses and gives his readers cause to remember that the emotional power of many paintings transcends historical circumstance.

Over the years writers of exhibition catalogues on nineteenth-century American art have assumed that the exhibition itself—galleries full of paintings—would convey visual poetry in full measure. Writers of books unassociated with exhibitions, on the other hand, have often depended on reproductions of paintings to achieve the same end, and since the best of these are rarely more than desiccated echoes of originals, this goal has been difficult to achieve without resort to words. One supposes that the general disinclination to deal with, or even take much note of, the widely comprehended poetic spirit of such paintings as Mount's *Eel Spearing at Setauket* (1845; New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown) or Church's *Mount Ktaadn* may come, for many authors, from the well-established practice in American art historical writing, encouraged by the needs of exhibitions, of engaging only part of the whole. Yet the varied strengths of these three books add enough to the literature to dissuade us from worrying about whether their scopes might not have been larger. Each in its way speaks of the present state of scholarly writing about nineteenth-century American painting and reveals something of how that state came to be. —

Notes

1. Lloyd Goodrich, *Thomas Eakins*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Elizabeth Johns, *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
2. John Wilmerding, *Important Information Inside: The Art of John F. Peto and the Idea of Still-Life Painting in Nineteenth-Century America*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1983).

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